

10-3-18

Paul Palmer

Re: SB 541 support

It took me 15 years to find a dentist.

As someone who was born with cerebral palsy, doing everyday things is sometimes a challenge. What shouldn't be a challenge for somebody like me is finding a dentist, but unfortunately that's an obstacle many disabled Michigan residents face.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that nearly 1.4 million Michigan residents may be living with a disability, whether physical, developmental or both. According to a 2015 study, the most difficult barrier to oral healthcare facing adult patients with special needs is finding a dentist willing to treat them.

Finding access to a dentist isn't a problem unique to the disabled community. In Michigan, 77 of our 83 counties are considered "dental shortage areas," which means there aren't enough dentists to serve the residents living there.

A number of vulnerable populations are affected by limited access to a dentist, including those living in rural areas, children, pregnant women, low-income families and seniors.

For those who do have a dentist relatively near their home, the next hurdle is whether that dentist will accept their insurance. Although people with disabilities, very low-income families and pregnant women are eligible for fee-for-service Medicaid, most dentists do not regularly see adults on Medicaid in our state.

In fact, according to the state Department of Health and Human Services, of Michigan adults over 21 on Medicaid, only 27 percent visited a dentist in 2015. While there are 6,641 active licensed dentists in the state, only 661 saw one or more adults on this type of Medicaid — just one out of 10.

Michigan has 45 Federally Qualified Health Centers that serve uninsured and Medicaid clients. However they report chronic understaffing of dentists at their clinics. So even patients who are able to get to a health center for care may be waiting months to have a cavity filled or a procedure done.

Senate Bill 541, introduced by Sen. Mike Shirkey, R- Clark Lake, could help expand access to care to those who are currently going without. This legislation would authorize a mid-level dental provider called a dental therapist.

Through appropriate training and licensing, these providers would be able to expand access to routine oral care, while working under the supervision of a dentist. Dental therapists would perform basic procedures, such as filling a cavity. The bill requires dental therapists to practice in high-need settings, such as a public clinic or a location where at least 50 percent of the patients are on Medicaid, uninsured or face other significant barriers to getting dental care. This will help ensure people like me will have more dental providers willing and able to treat them.

Because I have finally found a dentist who is extremely patient and kind and accepts Medicaid, I feel like a person. But for those who can't find a dentist who will see them, dental therapists would make a positive impact on Michigan residents, particularly those with disabilities like me.

